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# A Foundation Myth of Iceland

## —Reflections on the tradition of Haraldr hárfagri—

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### 1. Introduction

Iceland is generally believed to have been founded by Norwegian vikings who refused the overlordship of King Haraldr hárfagri (‘Fairhair’), the first king to rule the whole of Norway. However, this well-known story, which is often told as a tale demonstrating a free and independent spirit, is a problematic interpretation of the foundation of Iceland. First of all, the link between the settlement of Iceland and Haraldr hárfagri’s unification of Norway lacks contemporary sources; furthermore, the existence of King Haraldr in 9<sup>th</sup>-century Norway itself is based only on later sources, as this paper will argue.

Why, then, has the story been so popular? A primary reason seems to be that most popular *Íslendingasögur* (‘Sagas of Icelanders’) include it. But the sagas cannot be regarded as contemporary testimonies about the settlement of Iceland, having been written much later than the date of the events which they narrate. Although oral tradition could have played a significant role in the writing of these texts, the sagas in their present form are more-or-less creations dating from the 13<sup>th</sup> century onwards. In this sense, we can deal with the story of the settlement as a variant of ‘foundation myths’ or ‘origin legends’ common to many medieval societies.

#### 1.1 Theoretical background : Foundation myths in medieval societies

To begin, we need a definition of the term ‘myth’ in the context of recent scholarship. ‘Myth’ is broadly used to denote a text – written or oral – with which a group of humans identify themselves, forming a ‘group-identity’ or a self-consciousness that explains their position in a more general picture of

the world.<sup>1</sup>

Myth, in this analytic sense, was initially applied to understand the nationalism of modern societies in postmodern historiography in the 1980s. The most influential work on myth, by Benedict Anderson (*Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*), was first published in 1983. One of the main points of his argument is the insubstantiality of modern nations, which only exist as long as a group believes in the shared fiction that was created to explain their origin and solidarity.

In the context of medieval history, two names stand out. One is Anthony D. Smith, who published *The ethnic origins of nations* in 1986. Although his interest originated in the study of modern nations, he traces their ethnic origins back to pre-modern ethnic identities, through the analysis of their myths and memories.

The other author is an English medievalist, Susan Reynolds. She has argued that the political communities which can be called ‘nations’ were already established in the Middle Ages through the sharing of law and custom, *not* merely through the sharing of ethnic identities (which is Smith’s contention). Reynolds thus emphasizes the political aspect of medieval communities. A ‘people’ or a community which shares law and custom should have a specific, idiosyncratic foundation myth – for example, a sacred bloodline from the gods or ancient heroes, such as biblical persons or Trojan heroes. Given that the myth of common origin had the primary function of reinforcing the sense of solidarity as members of the community, genealogical historiographies tended to be written for the sake of the ruler’s

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<sup>1</sup> I arrived at this definition from such remarks: “Myth is one of ways in which collectivities – in this context, more especially nations – establish and determine the foundations of their own being, their own systems of morality and values. In this sense, therefore, myth is a set of beliefs, usually put forth as a narrative, held by a community about itself” (George Schöpfli 1997: p.19); “If sagas are myth in the sense that they are the product of a particular group of humans’ need to make sense of who they are and what is going on around them, they are also history because they try to find this meaning within a Christian world-view based on a linear conception of time” (Torfi H. Tulinius 2000: p.537).

demand for legitimacy.<sup>2</sup>

## 1.2 The Icelandic context

Basing on these analyses, the tradition of Haraldr hárfagri and the Icelandic settlement can be understood as a variant form of foundation myth. Notable studies of this tradition have recently been published by Sverrir Jakobsson (1997; 1999a; 2002). Making a thorough investigation of contemporary sources, Sverrir draws clear attention to the fashioning process of the tradition about this half-historical king in the historiography of Norway and Iceland. He concludes that a king called Haraldr may have existed in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, but that the figure of the king in sagas should be seen as a mythical figure, just like King Arthur in England.

Helgi Skúli Kjartansson also made a significant observation at the 13<sup>th</sup> International Saga Conference in 2006. He focused on the two elements of Haraldr's tyranny in Snorri Sturluson's (d.1241) *Heimskringla*: A feudal pyramid system with *jarlar* ('earls') and the confiscation of *óðal* ('patrimonial land'). Having found out that the two elements have similarities to policies in 11<sup>th</sup>-century England – namely, Cnut's introduction of the *ealdorman* system in 1017 and the land arrangement after the Norman Conquest in 1066 – he concluded that the elements were integrated in the tradition of Haraldr in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, borrowing new ideas from England. After the death of King Magnus bareleg ('Barefoot') in 1103 there was strong competition for the position of sole ruler in Norway, and the competition for legitimacy among the king's pretenders could have intensified the discourse about Haraldr hárfagri as the first model in the dynasty.

From the viewpoint of a foundation myth, it is quite reasonable to assume that the tradition of dynasty founder has developed out of the wishes of Norwegian magnates. But questions still remain: How did the tradition develop in the 200 years from the 11<sup>th</sup> century until the early 13<sup>th</sup> century,

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<sup>2</sup> Reynolds, Susan 1983: p.375.

when *Heimskringla* was written, and what were the needs of Icelanders? When and why was the myth integrated in Icelandic narratives?

## 2. *Íslendingasögur* : An overview

Before examining the smaller details, I would first like to look at the big picture. The tradition of Haraldr hárfagri and the Icelandic settlement is still so popular with academics and general readers today, but how many medieval texts actually mention the myth? To approximate, I provide an overview of *Íslendingasögur*, the largest and most popular genre of sagas.

According to *A companion to Old Norse-Icelandic literature and culture* there are 40 extant *Íslendingasögur*. Table 1 (in the Appendix) shows these 40 titles in order of their composition date according to the *Íslensk fornrit* series.<sup>3</sup> A brief survey was made to determine whether they refer to Haraldr hárfagri. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: References to Haraldr hárfagri

A	26	do not mention the settlement or Haraldr hárfagri
B	10	mention the link between the settlement and Haraldr's unification
C	3	mention the settlement in Haraldr's time, but do not mention the unification
D	2	mention friendship with Haraldr hárfagri
	41	(total: including two versions of the <i>Gísla saga</i> )

First, the results show that only one fourth of the preserved *Íslendingasögur* directly mention the link between the settlement and Haraldr's unification (B:10/41). This proportion does not seem particularly high. But since more than half of the sagas do not mention King Haraldr's

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<sup>3</sup> Rory McTurk, 2005: pp.114-115. In order to take a brief look of all the sagas, I used the online texts in the *Icelandic Saga Database* [<http://www.sagadb.org/>], accessed December 15. 2010.

time itself (A: 26), if we focus on the ones that *do* narrate events in his time (15 texts), it turns out that two-thirds of them mention the settlement in relation to the unification (B: 10/15). This is more noteworthy.

Furthermore, there are two unusual cases, which show the saga-heroes' friendship with Haraldr (D) but which also mention the conflicts between monarchs and other magnates in Norway (numbers correspond to Table 1):

- 6. *Kormáks saga*: The settlers were good friends with Haraldr, but disliked his inheritors, Eiríkr blóðöx ('Blood-Axe') and his queen Gunnhildr, and emigrated from Norway. The reason for the settlement here is also antipathy to overlords in Norway, but not to Haraldr hárfagri himself.

- 24. *Vatnsdæla saga*: The settler Ingjaldr fought for Haraldr at the crucial battle of Hafursfjörðr. Ingjaldr favoured Haraldr all the way, but there was hostility between the king and other magnates (or local lords) in Norway. Ingjaldr's blood-brother, Sæmundr, went to Iceland because of antipathy to Haraldr's rule, for example.

Including these two sagas, we have 12 sagas which mention unification in the context of the Icelandic settlement (B+D). Conversely, there are still three sagas which do not mention the unification, in spite of referring to the settlement in Haraldr's time (C):

- 3. *Eiríks saga rauða*: The saga refers to the settlement of Auðr djúpúðga ('Deep-Minded'), but not to any discord with Haraldr, nor even his name.

- 28. *Hrafnkels saga*: There is reference to the lineage of King Haraldr and the settlement in his day, but not to the reason for the settlement.

- 32. *Þorskfirðinga saga*: It refers to King Haraldr merely in order to show the calendar of events.

It is hard to interpret the reason for their silence from only a few related descriptions in the sagas. Possibly, they might have tried to show their neutrality to the king or simply been uninterested in the matter.

Above all, most *Íslendingasögur* which mention the settlement in King

Haraldr's day connect it with his unification of Norway. The tradition can thus be regarded as the most conventional narrative of settlement in *Íslendingasögur*.

Table 3: 10 sagas that include a negative description of Haraldr's unification

no.	Title	Oldest MS	Date according to ÍF	Date acc. to others
8	Egils saga	c.1250	1220-30	E
12	Eyrbyggja saga	c.1300	c.1229 (1250-*)	C / c.1265
13	Laxdæla saga	c.1275	1230-60	C
15	Harðar saga ok Hólmverja	c.1400	1235-45/14th c.	L
18	Gísla saga (long)	c.1400	c.1250	C
27	Flóamanna saga	c.1400	1290-1330	L
34	Grettis saga	c.1500	1310-20	L / 1400-
37	Svarfdæla saga	c.1450	1350-1400	L
38	Bárðar saga	c.1400	1350-80	L
39	Víglundar saga	c.1500	c.1400	L

(\* date by Sigurður Nordal)

Let us look more closely at the 10 sagas which definitely show a negative attitude to Haraldr's unification (see Table 3). The oldest is *Egils saga*, from 1220-30. *Egils saga* centres on the conflicts between the main characters and Haraldr hárfagri (and his successor Eiríkr blóðöx), and show explicit antipathy to the unification. Taking into account this characteristic, *Egils saga* may have had significant influence on later narratives. For example, *Eiríks saga rauða*, *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Laxdæla saga* all include the story of the same settlers, i.e. the children of Ketill flatnefr ('Flatnose'). *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Laxdæla saga*, which were thought to have been written after *Egils saga*, mention the tension between Ketill flatnefr and King Haraldr as background to the story of their emigration. *Eiríks saga rauða*, on the other hand, which is dated to 1200-30 and thus prior to *Egils saga*, does not mention the unification of Haraldr, nor even give his name. Remembering Theodore Andersson's idea of the possibility of a close link in

the writing of these three sagas,<sup>4</sup> we may suppose the influence of *Egils saga* on the other two in narrating of the settlement.

However, *Íslendingasögur* is especially controversial in terms of its chronology. In spite of the immense effort in scholarship over the last hundred years, we still do not know the exact date of each saga's composition. This is true even of the manuscripts: we should note "that saga manuscripts can rarely be dated with absolute confidence".<sup>5</sup> The creation of sagas are not akin to modern novels with a publishing date, as recent saga studies – in particular on oral tradition and performance – have shown.<sup>6</sup> That means that the conventional method of reception history, which analyzes discourses developed over time, is not always successful for *Íslendingasögur*. Given this difficulty, how can we determine the process by which a narrative has been formulated?

We can attempt a reconstruction. *Egils saga* is dated to around 1220-30, and it is essential that we see testimonies in the preceding period in order to follow the fashioning process of the myth of Haraldr hárfagri.

### 3. Creating a myth

#### 3.1 The first stage (12<sup>th</sup> century)

The first thing we should note is that no contemporary testimonies exist on King Haraldr hárfagri in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. The name 'Haraldr hárfagri' is first found in an 11<sup>th</sup>-century description in the D-version of the Anglo-Saxon chronicle, and the same name appears in other English sources, such as the *Chronicon ex chronicis* of John of Worcester (d.1140) or the Church history of Ordericus Vitalis (1075-1142). This Haraldr, however, clearly refers to Haraldr harðráði ('Harsh-Ruler') Sigurðsson, who fell in England in 1066, not his 9<sup>th</sup>-century namesake.<sup>7</sup> We have too few sources for kings in Norway

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<sup>4</sup> Andersson 2006: ch.8, pp.150-161. He argues that there were sequential responses: *Egils saga*→*Laxdæla saga*→*Eyrbyggja saga*.

<sup>5</sup> Vésteinn Ólason, in McTurk. ed. 2006: p.116.

<sup>6</sup> About oral tradition, Gísli Sgurðsson 2004 is the most comprehensive.

<sup>7</sup> Sverrir Jakobsson 1999a: bls.44.



in the 9<sup>th</sup> or early 10<sup>th</sup> centuries to make a convincing attribution.

Ari fróði Þorgilsson (ca.1068-1148) was the first to set King Haraldr hárfagri historically, in his *Íslendingabók*, written in 1122-1133, which describes the king as born in 851/2.<sup>8</sup> The book starts with the *Prologus*, in which Ari tells the genealogy of the king:

Halfdan hvítbeinn Upplendingakonungr, sonr Óláfs trételgju Svíakonungs, vas faðir Eysteins frets, fōður Halfdanar ens milda ok ens matarilla, fōður Goðrøðar veiðikonungs, fōður Halfdanar ens svarta, fōður Haralds ens hárfagra, es fyrstr varð þess kyns einn konungr at øllum Norvegi. (*Prologus*)<sup>9</sup> [Emphasis mine].

(Halfdan Whiteleg, king of the Upplanders, son of Óláfr Treefeller, king of the Swedes, was the father of Eysteinn Fart, father of Halfdan the Bounteous but Stingy-with-Food, father of Goðrøðr the Hunter-King, father of Halfdan the Black, father of Haraldr the Finehair, who was the first of that family line to become sole king over the whole of Norway).

Next to a description of the first settlement by Ingólfr, Ari explains Haraldr's involvement in the settlement as follows:

En þá varð fōr manna mikil mjōk út hingat ýr Norvegi, til þess unz konungrinn Haraldr bannaði, af því at hōnum þótti landauðn nema. Þá sættusk þeir á þat, at hverr maðr skyldi gjalda konungi fimm aura, sá es eigi væri frá því skiliðr ok þaðan fœri hingat. En svá es sagt, at Haraldr væri sjau tegu vetra konungr ok yrði áttreðr. Þau hafa upphōf verit at gjaldi því es nú es kallat landaurar, en þar galzk stundum meira en stundum minna, unz Óláfr enn digri gōrði skýrt, at hverr maðr skyldi gjalda konungi halfa mōrk, sá es fœri á miðli Norvegs ok Íslands, nema

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<sup>8</sup> Sverrir Jakobsson 1997: s.597; Sverrir 1999a: bls.45.

<sup>9</sup> *Íslendingabók : Landnámabók*. 1968 (ÍF 1): bls.3. The English translation is by Siân Grønlie (2006).

konur eða þeir menn es hann næmi frá. Svá sagði Þorkell oss Gellissonr.  
(ch.1)<sup>10</sup>

(And then a great many people began to move out here from Norway, until King Haraldr forbade it, because he thought it would lead to depopulation of the land. They then came to the agreement that everyone who was not exempt and who had travelled here from there should pay the king five ounces of silver. And it is said that Haraldr was king for seventy years and lived into his eighties. These were the origins of the tax which is now called land-dues, and sometimes more was paid for it and sometimes less, until Óláfr the Stout made it clear that everyone who travelled between Norway and Iceland should pay the king half a mark, except for women and those men whom he exempted. Þorkell Gellisson told us so).

Here Ari relates that the king was afraid of depopulation of Norway as a result of great emigration and banned it with a fine, *landaurar*; the reason for such a great migration is not mentioned. The banning of emigration and the imposition of *landaurar* might be interpreted as an indication of the king's 'tyranny', but the description has no explicit tone of antipathy; rather, it speaks of the close relationship between two countries and the popularity of migration to Iceland. Was the tradition of Haraldr's tyranny not common around 1120, or did Ari think of it as something that should not be acknowledged?

Sverrir Jakobson treats the attitude to the king in *Íslendingabók* quite objectively; there is nothing to support the myth that attributes the emigration to the king's tyranny.<sup>11</sup> Sveinbjörn Rafnsson, on the other hand, asserts that the former version of *Landnámabók* would have been older than *Íslendingabók*, in which Ari tries to refute the older stories in *Landnámabók* about the tyranny of Haraldr.<sup>12</sup> Sverrir repudiates this idea; his argument is basically that it is hard to determine the contents of the original version of

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<sup>10</sup> *Íslendingabók* 1968: bls.5-6.

<sup>11</sup> Sverrir 1999a: bls.45.

<sup>12</sup> Sveinbjörn Rafnsson 1974: bls.207-8; Id. 2001: bls.12.

*Landnámabók* from the preserved versions in the manuscripts, which only date from the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

We do have another testimony, however, dating from the beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, by William of Malmesbury (ca.1095-ca.1143) in England. He had completed his *Gesta regum* by 1125,<sup>13</sup> in which he mentions, in his account of King Aðalsteinn (Æpelstan, reign 924-939), “A certain Haraldr, a king in Norway, sent him a ship gilded with prow and purple sail”.<sup>14</sup> Here again Haraldr is placed in the context of 9<sup>th</sup>-century Norway, or, more precisely, in the time 54-69 years after the first settlement of Iceland in 870, when the king was a few years older than 16, according to *Íslendingabók*.<sup>15</sup> Since Ari mentions that the king lived long, to 80 years of age (as quoted above), the suggestion that he was active over the age of 70 is not implausible. William was unlikely to have known Ari’s work, and both the comments are dissimilar. That means two independent testimonies appeared at the beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> century about a king in Norway who was called Haraldr and lived around the year 900, which more safely testifies to the existence of the tradition in the period.<sup>16</sup>

To sum up, in the early 12<sup>th</sup> century there existed stories about King Haraldr hárfagri, a king in 9<sup>th</sup>-century Norway, who became the sole ruler of all Norway for the first time; but the earliest testimonies, *Íslendingabók* and *Gesta regum*, did not mention the king’s tyranny or its connection to the settlement of Iceland. The tradition of Haraldr’s tyranny seems to have developed from ca.1120 – this is more likely than that Ari deliberately avoided the tradition which already became common by his time of writing. Norwegian sources from the late 12<sup>th</sup> century, like *Historia de antiquitate*

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<sup>13</sup> E. Burton 1912. William of Malmesbury. In *The Catholic encyclopedia*. New York: Robert Appleton Company, from the website *New Advent* [<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/15633d.htm>].

<sup>14</sup> Sverrir 1999a: bls.45.

<sup>15</sup> *Íslendingabók* 1968: bls.5 (ch.1).

<sup>16</sup> William, however, did not use the nickname ‘hárfagri’ about the 9<sup>th</sup>-century Haraldr; he probably knew it in connection with the 11<sup>th</sup>-century Haraldr. Sverrir 1999a: bls.46.

*regum Norwagiensium* by Theodoricus monachus (written shortly before 1180), or *Historia Norwegiæ* (probably written in the late 12<sup>th</sup> century), used the traditions set out by Ari or in *Landnámabók* as sources and referred to Haraldr's unification of Norway<sup>17</sup> and competition with other magnates, but neither mentioned the link between the unification and the settlement of Iceland.

This paper will now turn from kings' sagas to sagas about Icelanders themselves, in order to explore the concerns of Icelandic society and its peoples' ways of using tradition.

### 3.2 Making variants : Regrant in the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century

This section attempts to provide a snapshot of various ways of narrating myth in Iceland and myth's relation to social reality.

Here a settler is picked up, called Geirmundr heljarskinn ('Death-skin'). According to *Landnámabók*, Geirmundr was a warrior-king who had a property in Rogaland in Norway. While he went as viking to the British Isles, Haraldr hárfagri won a battle in Hafursfjörður and completed his unification:

Hann [King Haraldr] hafði þá lagt undir sik allt Rogaland ok tekit þar marga menn af óðulum sínum. Sá þá Geirmundr øngvan annan sinn kost en ráðask brutt, því at hann fekk þar øngvar sœmðir.<sup>18</sup>

(He'd conquered the whole of Rogaland and driven a good many farmers from their estates. Geirmundr realized he had no choice but to emigrate, because he had no standing there any more). [Emphasis mine].

This quotation is from *Sturlubók*, dated to ca.1275-80. Here we can see the reference to the patrimonial estate (*óðal*), which is common in discourses concerned with the king's tyranny.

Yet another description of Geirmundr is found in *Grettis saga*, which is

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<sup>17</sup> *Historia Norwegiæ* narrates, however, that the dominion of Haraldr was limited to the coastal region. Sverrir 1999a: bls.46-7.

<sup>18</sup> *Íslendingabók : Landnámabók*. 1968: bls.152 (*Sturlubók* 112 kap., *Hauksbók* 86 kap.). The translation is from *The book of settlements: Landnamabok*. 1972: p.57.

thought to be a later work in *Íslendingasögur*, dated to 1310-20 according to *ÍF*. Here, Geirmundr heljarskinn was a local-lord in Norway, but during his viking expedition, King Haraldr placed the land under his rule. Önundr Ófeigsson came to see Geirmundr and asked if he had intention to get back his estate from the hands of Haraldr. Then he answered:

Geirmundur kvað þá orðinn svo mikinn styrk Haralds konungs að honum þótti það lítil von að þeir fengju þar sæmdir með hernaði að menn fengu þá ósigur er að var dreginn allur landslýður, og kveðst eigi nenna að gerast konungsþræll og biðja þess er hann átti áður sjálfur, kveðst heldur mundu leita sér annarra forráða (*Grettis saga*, ch.3).<sup>19</sup>

(Geirmundr answered that Haraldr had such a force that there was little hope of gaining any honour by fighting when the whole country had joined against him and been beaten. He had no mind, he said, to become the king's thrall, and to beg for that which he had once possessed in his own right. Seeing that he was no longer in the vigour of his youth he preferred to find other lands to rule). [Emphasis mine].

Except for the siting of his estate in Norway,<sup>20</sup> the description of Geirmundr's emigration is in accord with that of *Landnámabók*. The words "He had no mind...to become the king's thrall, and to beg for that which he had once possessed in his own right" clearly explain what the confiscation of *óðal* meant for Norwegian magnates, and also present the concept of 'regrant'. Regrant is a fundamental component of the feudal system: Vassals of a king or overlord offered their free-held lands to the king when they entered into vassalage, and then the king 're-granted' them their lands as fiefdoms, in return for feudal service. That means the estates theoretically belonged to the king, and vassals used them only on behalf of the king.

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<sup>19</sup> The text of *Grettis saga* is retrieved from *Icelandic Saga Database* [[http://www.sagadb.org/grettis\\_saga](http://www.sagadb.org/grettis_saga)] and written in the Modern-spelling. The English translation by G. H. Hight in 1914 is also from the same website.

<sup>20</sup> "... og þó átti hann [Geirmundr] ríki á Hörðalandi." *Grettis saga*, ch.2.

As Helgi Skúli points out, the idea of the king as a universal landlord, which forms the basis of regrant, was uncommon in Scandinavia at least until 1066:

His conqueror [i.e. King Haraldr hárfagri in *Heimskringla*] does not just kick out the other lot to replace it with his own, he legislates himself into the position of universal landlord. Such a move would surely be unthinkable in the Viking world – until the Norman conquest of England. William the Conqueror not only confiscated most of the estates of the Saxon nobility but introduced a brand new sort of feudalism under which all the land in the kingdom, at least theoretically, was held from the king.<sup>21</sup>

In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the notion of regrant clearly appeared in the policy of King Hákon Hákonarson (reign 1217-63). In becoming the king's retainers, most Icelandic chieftains were also integrated into this feudal system, particularly in the 1240s-1260s.<sup>22</sup> They offered their *goðorð* ('chieftaincy')<sup>23</sup> to the king, and then the king regranted them as fiefs.

In Iceland, however, this system of regrant – the king's right of property – was not always respected; or rather, it was often ignored by local leading farmers, and even by retainers themselves. The well-known example is the case of Snorri Sturluson's inheritance. King Hákon and Jarl Skúli made Snorri *lendr maðr* ('baron') in 1220, though the dealing of his property was not mentioned anywhere in either *Íslendingasaga* or *Hákonar saga*.<sup>24</sup> King Hákon claimed Snorri's inheritance after having him killed in 1241, and granted the inheritance to Þórðr kakali in 1247, in return for cooperation with his policy to persuade Icelanders to swear fealty and tribute. Having found that Þórðr was not eager to carry out the mission, the king regranted the

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<sup>21</sup> Helgi Skúli 2006: p.5.

<sup>22</sup> Following the return of Sturla Sighvatsson from Norway in 1236, most Icelandic chieftains became royal retainers. Guðrún Nordal 2000: p.230.

<sup>23</sup> In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, *goðorð* were thought of as territorial titles, with definite borderlines and dominion over inhabitants.

<sup>24</sup> *Sturlunga saga* I: bls.263. *Hákonar saga*: ch.58.

inheritance to other retainers in 1252: Finbjörn Helgason, Gissur Þorvaldsson and Þorgils skarði<sup>25</sup>. They went back to Iceland in the summer of 1252 with the king's letters, and Þorgils skarði claimed his share of Snorri's inheritance under the king's authority at the meeting of leading farmers in Höfðahólar:

En Þorgils stóð upp og segir: „Það er mönnum kunnigt að eg hefi stefnt fund þenna. En það er fyrir þá sök að eg em skyldaður til í dag að reka konungs erindi. Mun hér lesið vera konungsbréf. Bið eg að menn gefi hér til gott hljóð og hyggi síðan að svörum.“

Hélt þá Þorgils á bréfinu og sýndi innsiglið, bað Þorleif að fá mann til að lesa ef hann vildi.

Þorleifur kveðst það eigi mundu gera: „Fer það þann veg að margir eru fúsir til héraðs þessa en fáir eru til mótsvara í dag. Má það vel bíða annars dags eða þess að við er Hrafn og Sturla og vér gerum allir saman ráð fyrir svörum. Og vitum vér að þér er skipað hérað þetta af konungi og er það erindi hans í dag en margir mæla það að hann eigi ekki í. Em eg ekki arfi Snorra Sturlusonar þótt eg hafi hér nokkura forsjá með ráði Þórðar. Em eg eigi fyrir svörum um þetta mál meir en aðrir.“

Þetta studdu margir með Þorleifi, þótti konungur ekki maklegur að hafa nokkur forræði á erfð Snorra Sturlusonar. (*Þorgils saga skarða*)<sup>26</sup>

(Þorgils now stood up and said: “Men know that I have called this meeting, and that is because I am bound today to deliver the king's message. The king's letter will be read out here. I ask that men here give it a good hearing and later think of answers”).

Then Þorgils held the letter in his hand and, showing the seal, asked Þorleifr to get someone to read it if he liked.

Þorleifr answered they would not do: “It goes like this: many covet this district

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<sup>25</sup> *Sturlunga saga* II: bls.568, 585.

<sup>26</sup> *Sturlunga saga* II: bls.587. The text uses the Modern-spelling. The English translation is based on vol.2 of McGrew & Thomas' work in 1974, with slight emendation.

but few are here to answer to that today. This can certainly wait for another day, or until Hrafn and Sturla are present and we can all come together to reach some decision. We know that this district has been assigned to you by the king and that it is his business today, but many men claim that he has no rights. I am not Snorri Sturluson's heir, though I have some authority here by Þórðr's decision. But I am no more ready to answer in this matter than others".

Many men, who thought that the king did not deserve to have any rights about Snorri Sturluson's inheritance, supported Þorleifr).

Þorgils had the letter read after this, but farmers were reluctant to respond. Eventually, they decided not to accept Þorgils as their chieftain.

If we believe the description above, in the middle of the 13<sup>th</sup> century lineage and the idea of patrimony were more highly regarded as components of inheritance law in Iceland than the king's authority, as represented by the royal letter and seal. Prominent farmers in Iceland probably did not feel it necessary to respect the decisions of overseas kings. For them, the most important thing was which chieftain actually ruled the district, and for whom they may well have to risk their lives. For their part, the chieftains, who must have known the logic by which the king claimed his right in Iceland, also had to respect the intentions of farmers to some degree, for military or economic reasons. The king's authority did not yet have actual effect within the island, at least concerning inheritance. However, producing the king's letter at a meeting may have caused argument, in which some people might have thought that regrant of inheritance had reduced their status from honourable freeholder to *konungsþræll* ('kings thrall' – *Grettis saga*, ch.3) or *leigumaðr* ('tenant') (*Laxdæla saga*, ch.2).

After 1262/64, when Icelanders officially accepted the Norwegian king's rule, the traditional *goðorð* system was abolished and chieftains became royal officers. Theoretically, their property still belonged to king and was regranted to them in return for service in the king's administration. Hence, the antipathy to confiscation of lands in the myth of Haraldr hárfagri might well have reflected debates on the development of the king's



integration of land properties in Iceland from the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century onwards. Although closer investigation is required, we can at least be certain that controversy developed over the right to property in Iceland that included a remote participant: The Norwegian king.

### 3.3 Scepticism towards the myth

On a related note, there is another story of Geirmundr heljarskinn in *Sturlunga saga*: *Geirmundar þáttur heljarskinns* was written ca. 1300, probably by the compiler of *Sturlunga* as a prologue to the compilation. This story does not mention any specific place-names concerning Geirmundr's estate, but states that he was a local king in Norway. Just like the other two versions, he went out as a viking and came back:

Þeir bræður héldu samfloti tveim skipum í Noregskonungs ríki. Þá réð fyrir Noregi Haraldur hárfagri og ætluðu þeir bræður að hafa þar friðland og skildu þá samflot sitt og félag. Og er konungr frétti það þá líkar honum eigi þarvist þeirra og þykir eigi örvænt að þeir muni þar eflast ætla til móts við sig. Og það vilja sumir menn segja að Geirmundur færi fyrir ofríki Haralds konungs til Íslands. En eg hefi þat heyrt að í þann tíma er þeir bræður komu úr vestvíking væri sem mest orð á að engi þætti vera frægðarför meiri en fara til Íslands. Og af því hinu sama vildi Geirmundur sigla út þegar um sumarið er þeir komu við Noreg. (*Geirmundar þáttur heljarskinns*, ch.3)<sup>27</sup>

(The brothers sailed together in two ships to the kingdom of Norway. Haraldr hárfagri was then ruling Norway; the brothers intended to find refuge, and there disbanded their shared sailing ventures and partnership. But when the king heard about this, he did not like them staying there, and thought it not unlikely that they were thinking of raising forces against him. Some people want to say that Geirmundr went away to Iceland because of King Haraldr's tyranny. But I have heard it said that at the time when those brothers returned from their expedition

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<sup>27</sup> *Sturlunga saga* I: bls.3.

to the west, it was generally held that there was no more glorious journey than the voyage to Iceland. And for this very reason Geirmundr meant to sail out straightway after the summer when they came back to Norway). [Emphasis mine].

One reason for his settlement was “the tyranny of King Haraldr”. The word *ofríki* (‘tyranny’) is not used in descriptions of Geirmundr in either *Grettis saga* or in *Landnáma* (Sturlubók and Hauksbók),<sup>28</sup> but is common in other sagas (such as *Harðar saga ok Hólmverja*, *Flóamanna saga* and *Svarfdæla saga*, for example).

What is more interesting is that the author of this story, or the compiler of *Sturlunga*, showed scepticism about the tradition, and mentioned another one, simply because of the extraordinarily high level of glory garnered from the journey to Iceland. It is thus likely that the discourse of the tyranny of Haraldr hárfagri had become a shared tradition by 1300, but there was a controversy at the same time. The question is, then, who needed the traditions?

*Geirmundar þáttur* is an introduction to *Sturlunga*. One reason for its inclusion is that Geirmundr settled in Skarð; the genealogies at the end of the story are traced not only from Geirmundr, but also from various settlers to the Skarð family, to which the supposed compiler of *Sturlunga*, Þórðr Narfason, belonged.<sup>29</sup> Geirmundr is also the only settler who is unquestionably the son of a king,<sup>30</sup> though a local one; his story thereby offers grounds for a royal connection to the Icelandic elite, which is a key theme underlying the whole of the compilation. For the Skarð family, the tradition that Geirmundr, their great ancestor, came to Iceland because of fears of the king’s power, as told in *Grettis saga*, would not have been

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<sup>28</sup> In fact, the Melabók version of *Landnáma* (c.1300) says, “Geirmundr fór til Íslands fyrir ofríki Haralds konungs hins hárfagra”. *Íslendingabók : Landnámabók*. 1968: bls.152 (Melabók 30 kap.).

<sup>29</sup> Úlfar Bragason 2004: p.319. Einar G. Pétursson 1977 asserted the close link between the Skarð family and Sturla Þórðarson (1214-1284).

<sup>30</sup> Guðrún Nordal 2000: p.225.

acceptable; travel for the sake of glory was surely much better. In late 13<sup>th</sup> century Iceland, the main readers of *Sturlunga*, i.e. the upper class of the society, constituted the new noble class of royal officials, and it was this class which gave the age of the Sturlungs its historical image.<sup>31</sup> Control of the discourse in the saga was a matter of political concern, not only for the Skarð family, but also for a number of descendants of protagonists in the saga. The case of Geirmundr heljarskinn clearly shows the narrator's efforts to control the discourse about the past for the sake of his generation, and, more precisely, of his family. It is possible that the narrator also tried to dispute the assumptions about settlement tradition, just as a present-day scholar might, but this needs further consideration than is possible here.

#### 4. Conclusion

Not until the early 12<sup>th</sup> century was there any written reference to the king Haraldr hárfagri of 9<sup>th</sup>-century Norway, and the earliest testimonies on the king did not mention his tyranny nor his connection to the settlement of Iceland. On the other hand, in *Íslendingasögur* which were written down from ca.1220 onwards, the discourse of Haraldr's tyranny is dominant. Thus, the myth of Haraldr's tyranny probably had developed from ca.1120 to ca.1220. However, it is certain that in the 13<sup>th</sup> century several traditions co-existed about the origin of Iceland, and members of the social elite competed for control of these traditions, as has been seen in the case of Geirmundr heljarskinn.

Examining the issue of regrant shows that the discourse of confiscation of *óðal* probably reflects an interest in the progress of feudalization in 13<sup>th</sup>-century Iceland. The discourse shows antipathy to sole rulership with exclusive rights to all land property in the kingdom, ideas on which the system of regrant was based. Although the narrative around Haraldr hárfagri tends to be regarded as the sign of antipathy to kingship or overlordship in general, this antipathy should be attributed to the specific form of lordship

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<sup>31</sup> Úlfar 2004: p.321.

that had newly evolved in Norway towards the middle of the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

It is important to note that the tradition of Haraldr hárfagri has been historically constructed. For this reason, analysis of this tradition offers us the chance to follow the traces of social reality or people's thoughts in the past, although the way is extremely intricate. Deeper exploration into the foundation myth of Iceland at least requires the analysis of kings' sagas and the other descriptions in *Landnámabók* – details which were beyond the scope of this paper – as well as taking a closer look at individual episodes in *Íslendingasögur*.

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## Appendix

Table 1: *Íslendingasögur* (order by date in ÍF) [Made from McTurk, Rory. ed. A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture, 2005, pp.114–115.]

no.		Title	Oldest MS	Date according to ÍF	Date according to others	Link with Haraldr hárfagri (chapter no.)
1	A	Fóstbrœðra saga	1302–10	c.1200	E/1250–1300	–
2	A	Heiðarviga saga	c.1300	c.1200 (before 1210)	E/c.1260	–
3	C	Eiríks saga rauða	1302–10	1200–30	E/1200–30	▲ referred to settlement, but not Haraldr
4	A	Droplaugarsona saga	c.1350	1200–40	E	–
5	A	Bjarnar saga Hítöelakpaa	c.1375	1215–30	E/c.1300	–
6	D	Kormáks saga	c.1350	by 1220	E	■ Friendship with Haraldr (1), but dislike to Eiríkr and Gunnhildr (2)
7	A	Hallfreðar saga vandræðaskálds	c.1350	c.1220	E	–
8	B	Egils saga	c.1250	1220–30	E	○ explicit antipathy (3–27, 30, 36: unification, conflicts)
9	A	Valla-Ljóts saga	c.1640	1220–40	E	–
10	A	Víga-Glúms saga	c.1350	1220–50	E	–
11	A	Vápnfirðinga saga	c.1425	1225–50	E	–
12	B	Eyrbyggja saga	c.1300	c.1229 (1250–)	C/c.1265	○ unification, the king's conflicts with <i>hersir</i> (1–3)
13	B	Laxdæla saga	c.1275	1230–60	C	○ unification (2)
14	A	Ljósvetninga saga	c.1400	1230?–50	E/c.1200?	–
15	B	Harðar saga ok Hólmverja	c.1400	1235–45/14th c.	L	○ <i>ofríki</i>
16	A	Qlkofra saga	c.1350	by c.1250	E	–
17	A	Gísla saga (short)	c.1400	c.1250	C	–
18	B	Gísla saga (long)	c.1400	c.1250	C	○ unification (1: 'Hann var fyrstr einvaldskonungur um allan Nóreg')
19	A	Bandamanna saga	c.1350	c.1250	C/c.1300	–
20	A	Reykðæla saga/Víga-Skútu	c.1400	c.1250	E	– (Good reputation of land quality of Iceland (1))
21	A	Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar	c.1700	1250 ±	L	–
22	A	Hoensa-Þóris saga	c.1500	1250–70	C	–
23	A	Gunnlaugs saga ornstungu	c.1325	1270–80	C	–
24	D	Vatnsdæla saga	c.1400	1270–80	E	■ Favourable (8–9,12)/Prophecy of <i>völva</i> for the settlement (10)
25	A	Þorsteins saga hvíta	1639	1275–1300	C	–
26	A	Njáls saga	c.1300	1275–85	C	–
27	B	Flóamanna saga	c.1400	1290–1330	L	○ <i>ófrið</i> , <i>óðal</i> , <i>ofríki</i> of Haraldr (1,4,5,6)
28	C	Hrafnkels saga	c.1500	by c.1300	C/by 1264	▲ to date the settlement (1), but no mention to its reason
29	A	Grœnlendinga saga	1387–94	c.1300	E/1200–30	–
30	A	Finnboga saga	c.1350	1300–50	L	–
31	A	Hávarðar saga Ísfríðings	c.1650	1300–50	L	–
32	C	Þorskiðinga saga	c.1400	1300–50	L	▲ to date (2: 'Þá réð Haraldur konungur hárfagri fyrir Noreg')
33	A	Kjalnesinga saga	c.1475	1310–20	L	–
34	B	Grettis saga	c.1500	1310–20	L/1400–	○ unification, <i>konungsbræll</i> (2–3)
35	A	Króka-Refs saga	c.1475	1325–75	L	–
36	A	Þórðar saga hreðu	c.1400	c.1350	L	– (1,2: massive flight from Norway because of the Gunnhildr' sons)
37	B	Svarfdæla saga	c.1450	1350–1400	L	○ <i>ofríki</i> (1,13)
38	B	Bárðar saga	c.1400	1350–80	L	○ unification, <i>finnskattr</i> (1)/Good land quality of Iceland (3)
39	B	Víglundar saga	c.1500	c.1400	L	○ unification (1,6): 'Haraldr hárfagri was 'einvaldskonungur yfir Noregi'
40	A	Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls	c.1650	1400–1500	L	–
41	A	Fljótsdæla saga	c.1625	1500–50	L/1300–1400	–
			c=±25 years	c = ±10 years	E = Early sagas (c.1200–80) C = Classical sagas (c.1240–1310)  L = Late sagas (c.1300–1450) (Classification by <i>Íslensk bókmenntasaga</i> II, 42.)	
	A	26: No mention of settlement, nor Haraldr fairhair				
	B	10: Link to Haraldr fairhair's unification				
	C	3: Mention of settlement in his period, but not of Haraldr's unification				
	D	2: Friendship with Haraldr				
		41 (total)				